Ethical Concerns in Academic Publishing: AI Allegations, Retraction Threats, and Prolific Authorship-Accusation of AI use in article published at the period that AI is not generally available

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Abstract

Recent concerns about the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in academic publishing have raised ethical questions, particularly in cases where authors have an unusually high number of publications. This article examines a case where an editorial board raised suspicions regarding the potential use of AI in publications by two authors, citing their prolific output and the nature of their contributions. The editorial board's actions—issuing an expression of concern, demanding explanations for AI usage, and threatening retraction—highlight the ethical implications of such accusations. By analyzing the specific case of two authors with over 400 and 4,000 publications, respectively, and exploring the technological context of AI availability at the time of publication (2018–2020), the article critiques the board's approach in the absence of concrete evidence. It emphasizes the need for due process, transparency, and clear standards when investigating potential misconduct in academic publishing.

Keywords: Academic Publishing, Artificial Intelligence, Ethical Concerns.

Introduction

The rapid evolution of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies has introduced new challenges for academic publishing. AI tools, such as text generation models, have sparked debates over their potential use in scholarly writing, particularly regarding issues like authorship, originality, and the ethical implications of AI-generated content. In academic circles, prolific authorship-especially in cases where an individual publishes hundreds or even thousands of articles-has been met with skepticism, raising questions about the authenticity and ethical standards of such publications. This article examines a case from an editorial board that raised concerns about two authors, questioning the role of AI in their publications and threatening retraction based on speculative evidence. By exploring the ethical ramifications of these actions, this article provides

a critical reflection on the editorial board's practices and their potential impact on academic integrity.

Case Study Summary

When getting a submission in 2024, he editorial board of a scholarly journal raised concerns over the prolific publishing output of authors who have many publications. The editorial board's suspicions about the potential use of AI in these publications were linked to the sheer volume of work. Nevertheless, the editorial board issued an expression of concern and requested an explanation from the corresponding author about the use of AI tools in their work. If the explanation did not meet the board's criteria, they threatened retraction of the articles. The editorial board raised concern on the previously published articles in 2018 and 2020. However, these actions raised significant ethical questions regarding the lack of direct evidence for AI usage in the author's work, particularly given the timeline (2018 and 2020) when AI tools like ChatGPT were not yet widely accessible. The case highlights potential ethical issues regarding editorial practices, the threat of retraction without concrete proof, and the need for transparency and due process in academic investigations.

Discussion

The editorial practice described in the statement raises several ethical concerns that warrant careful examination.

1. Accusation without Direct Evidence

The editorial board appears to have raised concerns about the use of AI in producing manuscripts, including some letters to the editor. However, the critique seems to be based on suspicions or patterns of prolific publication and the use of AI in general, rather than on specific evidence of misconduct or improper authorship. Accusations of this nature should ideally be based on verifiable evidence, not just patterns of publication. Ethical editorial practices generally require that claims of misconduct be substantiated with clear and direct evidence.

Problematic aspect: The mention of AI usage in relation to past publications (such as in 2018 and 2020) could be seen as a form of preemptive accusation, without specific evidence to support the claim. It could potentially damage the reputation of the authors, particularly if they are being implicated in unethical practices without solid proof.

2. AI Usage in 2018 and 2020

The argument that the author may have used AI (such as ChatGPT) for article generation in 2018 or 2020 is problematic because, ChatGPT and similar AI tools were not publicly available or widely known at that time. The first version of GPT (GPT-1) was released in 2018, but it was not at the level of sophistication or accessibility that would allow for easy mass-generation of academic content.

Technological context: In 2020, AI-powered tools for text generation (like GPT-2 or GPT-3) were already in existence, but they were not widely used in academic publishing. The widespread

usage of AI tools in scholarly work has only become more common in recent years, especially with the rise of publicly accessible tools like ChatGPT, which launched in late 2022. Therefore, the accusation of AI use in the generation of letters to the editor in 2018 or 2020 seems unlikely based on the available technology at the time. However, other forms of automated content generation (such as rule-based algorithms or earlier, simpler AI tools) may have been used, but this would require more context and evidence to confirm.

3. Letters to the Editor and AI Concerns:

The editorial board's concerns appear to be partly based on the unusually high number of articles authored by the author. Letters to the editor, while important forms of scholarly communication, are typically shorter and might be more easily automated or AI-assisted, given their brevity. However, it is a pattern of authorship (i.e., the large number of publications) rather than the content of the specific letters themselves that seems to be drawing attention. This raises a valid point about the need for transparency in authorship, especially with regard to automated tools, but it also reflects potential bias against highly productive authors without direct evidence of wrongdoing.

4. Ethical Concerns of Retraction Threats

The editorial board's mention of retraction as a potential outcome if the authors do not satisfactorily explain their use of AI could be seen as an overly punitive or preemptive stance, especially without clear evidence of misconduct. Retraction should generally follow an established process, particularly in cases where there is evidence of ethical violations such as plagiarism, fabrication, or falsification of data.

Due process: In this case, the authors should be given an opportunity to provide an explanation for the use of AI tools, but this should be done in a manner that allows for due process. Immediate threats of retraction without clear evidence could be considered unethical, as they may unduly harm the authors' careers and reputations based on speculative accusations.

5. Prolific Publishing and AI:

The high volume of publications is often a red flag in academic publishing, especially when a disproportionate number are letters to the editor or similar types of content that are less rigorous than original research articles. However, prolific publishing alone does not necessarily indicate misconduct or inappropriate use of AI. There are legitimate reasons for high productivity, such as the author's involvement in collaborative research or ongoing commentary in the field.

Conclusion

➢ The editorial board's practice of raising concerns about AI usage in the authors' past publications without direct evidence could be considered unethical, as it risks damaging the authors' reputations based on suspicion alone.

➢ The accusation of AI use in articles from 2018 and 2020 is questionable because AI tools like ChatGPT were not widely available or sophisticated enough to be used for academic writing at that time. Therefore, this accusation might not be reliable or justified.

➢ Ethical editorial practices should rely on solid evidence and allow authors the opportunity to explain or defend their work before any drastic measures, like retraction, are considered.

The situation would be more ethically sound if the editorial board sought a more thorough investigation or clarification before making accusations that could have serious implications for the authors' reputations.

Conflict of interest: none

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